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### Where are the women leaders in higher education

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## Where are the women leaders in higher education?

Dr. Rowena Arshad and Dr. Deirdre Torrance from the University of Edinburgh tell us about the challenges facing women in higher education and the changing landscape of the sector



Dr. Torrance (left) and Dr. Arshad at the British Council Global Education Dialogue in Delhi

*Dierdre Torrance and Dr. Rowena Arshad from the University of Edinburgh were in Delhi recently for the British Council Global Education Dialogue and 'International Colloquium on Women Leadership in School Education' organized by the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) where they spoke about the crisis of women leadership in the country.*

### ***Q. What according to you are the biggest challenges facing women in the education sector today?***

*Dr Deirdre Torrance:* The education sector today is challenging for both men and women. The pace of change is ever increasing, we all face multiple and competing demands and accountabilities. This contributes to significant workload and a feeling of loss of control over work-life balance. However, women face additional challenges that are complex and not altogether understood. Women are still regarded as the primary care-givers for children and as such, are still expected to play the traditional mother and wife roles regardless of how challenging their professional role is. Those expectations can also limit women's ability to network after hours and to travel away from home. In addition,

established cultures and workplace 'norms' can constrain women, creating barriers to career progression.



Deirdere Torrance has done extensive research on education for children with special needs

In the school and university sectors, we need further and current research into the challenges facing women leaders. There are recurring themes in the studies that have been conducted (although many of these studies are now rather dated). Although traditionally a much higher proportion of teachers internationally are female than male, they hold a minority of secondary school management positions and in primary schools, males hold an over representative proportion of management positions. Beyond schools, at local and central government levels, men still hold the majority of positions with power and influence over education.

*Dr Rowena Arshad:*

- Managing life work balance
- Getting past traditional models of leadership which favour a more 20th century version of leadership where leaders lead with a more authoritarian and instrumental approach. Research has shown women have developed a wider repertoire of approaches and may favour a more interdisciplinary, collaborative, problem solving, learner focused approach. The 21st century leader needs to be empathetic, critical, collaborative, agile, adaptive, creative, embrace entrepreneurialism and comfortable with diversity.
- Having the self confidence that they CAN STEP UP TO LEADERSHIP!



Rowena Arshad is the Head of Moray House School of Education and works to promote multicultural and anti-racist education

***Q. Despite the K-12 education landscape being dominated by women, women seem to disappear from the scene as you climb higher up. Why do you think this is and what can be done to rectify it?***

*Torrance:* Regardless of location in the world, one thing that unites us is that comparatively few women are represented in leadership roles within higher education. This is despite the often much more equal proportion of women represented in undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD admissions. A comparatively low proportion of women go forward for research roles (rather than teaching roles). This then restricts opportunities and affects career pathways, including access to leadership positions. For senior leadership positions in higher education, research accomplishment as well as budgetary and line management experience are regarded as prerequisites. Specific issues relating to women's access to senior leadership positions in South Asia countries include restrictions on mobility. This affects women's ability to take up employment opportunities in the first place, as well as their ability to travel when in post. Such restrictions then limit women's opportunity to attend conferences and as well as their ability to access and build networks of support, build their professional reputation and engage in collaborative writing and research projects.

*Arshad:*

- We need some inspirational and creative men to signal clearly that 21st century leadership requires a different approach and then...
- To appoint women who are prepared to ditch orthodox ways of working and be prepared to lead with creativity to trail blaze
- A focus on changing institutional cultures that enable diversities to thrive and promote diverse approaches. We should not shy away from looking at how institutional cultures are generally very male dominated and that everyday sexism might be operating within those set ups e.g. key business decisions being agreed at the golf course or within male networks

***Q. Enrollment of women students in undergraduate courses has surpassed that of men in recent years in the west. How do you think this will affect the landscape of higher education in the years to***

*come?*

*Torrance:* We need to take care not to develop an unhelpful narrative around the increasing numbers of women students in undergraduate courses. This should be something to celebrate and build upon. Higher education institutions should feel challenged to ensure that the trend continues, so that increased numbers of women engage in postgraduate and doctoral studies. Then, that those women go on to embark on promising careers and to leadership roles that can shape the future landscape of higher education in the years to come.

*Arshad:* It may change the landscape of HE if the women graduating have their voices and confidence developed to become change agents. If they are taught in a way that just promotes the status quo, the critical mass itself will not create the change. So these women need to have dynamic and bold women and male role models who signal clearly that 'women can do it'. These women graduates should also be studying in learning environments that will challenge sexism whether that is at a personal, cultural or institutional level. That links to my previous comment about the need to tackle everyday forms of sexism and sexual discrimination.

***Q. STEM subjects are growing in importance as the world around us changes and much has been said and done about encouraging primary school girls to study these subjects. What can be done to retain this pool of talent at higher levels (undergraduate, postgraduate, research)?***

*Torrance:* A range of strategies is needed to build upon the numbers of girls studying STEM subjects. Most of us are fortunate to be able to recall individuals who have been pivotal in encouraging us throughout our lives. Such encouragement starts in the home and continues through the pre-school, school stages and higher education levels. Public campaigns, appropriate levels of resourcing and engagement targets are all helpful strategies. It is often the encouragement and inspiration provided by individuals - both public figures as well as those within girls' immediate lives - that make a significant difference to the engagement of individual girls in STEM subjects. Great teachers make a great difference!

*Arshad:*

- Using role models
- Offer research and post-doc trajectories using positive action measures..so if a man or a women candidate is neck and neck, positively act in favour of the female candidate to redress the balance
- Provide mentoring opportunities for young women – the mentors can be either male or female but they need to be mentors that have an understanding of gender issues and can help these young women move up

***Q. Can you give us some examples (if any) of the changes that have taken place after the government and agencies have supported women in higher education?***

*Torrance:* Internationally in higher education, a number of strategies are being used to redress the gender gap. We need to guard against notions of 'exceptionalism' so that higher education is more inclusive. Mentoring can be really supportive as can exposure to women role models, with established women encouraging less established women. There is a real need to develop data gathering systems within and across countries, to inform discussion and action on the gender balance for higher education staff. At the moment, data gathered tends only to relate to students. Change is dependent on both supporting individual women and on challenging established practices for positively changing the culture of higher education contexts in which women and men work. In this way, current policy

silences need to be challenged. One way of approaching this might be through, for instance, including gender balance as a new comparator quality indicator for higher education internationally. Such a move would provide a mechanism to expose bias (whether conscious or unconscious) that is often inherent in current recruitment and selection processes, gendered divisions of labour, exclusionary networks and hostile cultures.

If such strategies were used, then greater transparency would become a requirement and it would not be left to individual women to challenge and change practices within higher education institutions.

*Arshad:* In the UK, where business has worked closely with HE e.g. engineering – this has encouraged (a) culture change within the sector to be more gender sensitive (b) young women taking on engineering courses and moving into the profession. Also if social aspects of a discipline are looked at, research has shown that this has attracted young women to consider some areas, which have traditionally been male preserves. For example, in the area of bridge building, yes you have to look at the technology and the mechanics of building a bridge but if you also look at the social aspects of why that particular bridge is needed and what social and ecological issues have to be considered, this will open up to a wider audience. Introducing a curriculum that also addresses core skills such as communication skills, using interactive teaching methods and a variety of forms of assessment (rather than relying solely on formal exams) have shown that such inclusive design has encouraged more young women into STEM areas. In the University of Edinburgh, our engagement with the ATHENA Swan initiative (<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charter-marks/athena-swan/>) has encouraged young women into STEM but more importantly has created culture shifts in the learning and workplace.

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